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SUBJECT: CAIRO ON THE EVE OF THE NATIONAL REFERENDUM

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11. (SBU) As the country readies for the rushed March 26 referendum on President Hosni Mubarak's constitutional amendments package, the government apparatus has swung belatedly into gear to raise public awareness about the event. All Egyptian TV channels - terrestrial and satellite - broadcast advertisements on March 24 and 25 calling on citizens to, "have a share in shaping the future of Egypt," by going to the polls. Several channels also featured clips of patriotic songs, and interviews with ruling party officials on the constitutional amendments. The Grand Shaykh of Al Azhar (the highest religious authority for Egyptian Muslims) urged Egyptians to participate in the referendum during a March 23 press conference, stressing that it is a "religious duty" for Muslims to vote. Egyptian TV also carried a March 25 Mubarak speech at Assiyut University, in which he exhorted Egyptians to go to the polls, and stated that the amendments, "represent an unprecedented development of our constitutional infrastructure, which will change the face of, and open new doors in front of, the political, parliamentarian and partisan lives in Egypt." In a rhetorical swipe at critics of the amendments, Mubarak also said, "I will never relinquish Egypt's interests, sovereignty, and independent will. I do not accept any pressures, dictations or conditions. I will not be dragged into jeopardizing the future of this homeland."

12. (SBU) On March 25, just one day before the referendum, all major newspapers ran pages dedicated to educating voters about the referendum, what the constitution is, and how to vote, but no paper carried the text of the amendments being voted on. Prominent human rights activist Bahey El Din Hassan was quoted on that topic in the leading daily Al Masry Al Yom: "What will citizens vote for if they are not aware of what the amendments are?" Many Cairo neighborhoods are festooned in home-made banners (apparently hung by local NDP parliamentarians, whose names are featured prominently), exhorting Egyptians to "Join the Coronation of Democracy - Vote in the Referendum!" and "Vote Yes to the Amendments, Which Will Bring Stability and Investment!" Meanwhile, unscientific polling of several local fruit vendors in downtown Cairo, conducted by poloff, demonstrated negligible popular awareness of the referendum ("Vote? Vote about what? Is it another presidential election?").

13. (SBU) All major opposition forces, including the Wafd and Taggamu parties (which were the last to announce their intent), have called for a boycott of the referendum. Activists attempted to gather in central Cairo's Liberation Square for a Kefaya-organized evening protest on March 25. The police presence around the square was overwhelming hours before the planned start of the protest, with 55 large

security trucks filled with riot police ringing the area, and when poloff observed the square an hour after the planned start of the protest, it was clear no demonstration had materialized. Poloff observed a small protest - 30-45 people - at the nearby press syndicate, with demonstrators chanting "Down, down with Mubarak," under the watchful eyes of several hundred policemen. Independent newspapers report that the Interior Ministry has canceled all leave for officers and policemen until after the referendum.

14. (SBU) Egyptian civil society groups continue to scramble to prepare volunteer monitors to deploy on March 26. The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) announced that it will open an operations center to coordinate its coverage of the referendum. NCHR also declared that it would mobilize 330 lawyers to observe the polling. The exact number of civil society monitors planning to deploy remains uncertain due to the last-minute efforts to mobilize monitors. Several civil society leaders with whom we spoke on March 25 expressed increasing worry about the GOE's tough approach towards demonstrators. One such leader said that he anticipated spending referendum day "trying to get the protesters out of jail"; other activists expressed fears to poloff that the GOE would target bloggers and other youthful activists for arrests.

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